

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson*****A Review of Access Control Measures at Our Nation's Airports***

February 3, 2015 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the Transportation Security subcommittee hearing entitled “A Review of Access Control Measures at Our Nation’s Airports”:

“After the horrific attacks of September 11, 2001, multiple layers of security were put in place to protect our aviation system. Not only did screening procedures and the list of prohibited items change, but the protocols for security of the airports changed as well. While Congress and the Executive Branch were making considerations to keep the traveling public safe, they also recognized there are 450 airports in the United States, each of which presents a unique set of security issues.

For instance, vendors and airline employees need access to various areas of the airport. In an effort to maintain security and provide a sense of practicality to airport and airline employees, legislation was implemented to allow vetted individuals to have unescorted access within the areas that lie beyond airports’ secure screening checkpoints. Airline and airport employees are vetted through a criminal background check and biographical check. Then they are issued Secure Identification Display Area (SIDA) Badges to use to gain access to the sterile area of the airport without having to go through physical screening. While SIDA badge holders are vetted daily against the terrorist watchlists, the criminal background checks are not conducted recurrently.

Mr. Chairman, this is concerning. In 2011, the Office of Inspector General found that some of the records provided by employees contained inaccuracies or omissions and that TSA had limited oversight of the application process. Moreover, recent events have me questioning whether TSA has taken the recommendations of the OIG seriously. I still question whether the airports and TSA have the adequate internal controls to address potential insider threats from SIDA badge holders. Do employees return badges upon termination? Are logs kept on the number of lost or stolen badges? Are badges being used to gain access only when an employee is on duty?

Unfortunately, in December 2014, we saw a deplorable instance of SIDA badge misuse. Five men were charged in connection with a plot to smuggle over 150 guns from Atlanta to New York City. One of these men is alleged to have used his credentials to get bypass physical screening and board flights to New York City.

Although the weapons were not intended to harm passengers, and these men have not been charged with terrorism, it is disheartening to think of the catastrophic consequences that could have occurred had one of those firearms been used on the airplane during the flight.

Mr. Chairman, as you know, the threat is evolving. As it evolves, we can not remain stagnant. It is my hope that through our continued oversight and bipartisan legislative work, we can make sure there are proper policies and procedures in place to ensure that those that have access to the sterile area of the airport cannot create such gross breaches of security. The security of an airport is a shared concern, and all entities should work together to ensure that the layers of security are as strong as can be.”

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FOR MORE INFORMATION: Please contact Adam Comis at (202) 225-9978